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The Cultural-Historical Origins of the Literary Vampire in Germany

Heide Crawford

Before British authors began writing vampire literature, culminating in 1897 with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, eighteenth-century German poets, most significantly Heinrich August Ossenfelder, Gottfried August Bürger and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, had begun to adapt the curious phenomenon of vampirism from Central Europe for the creative literature they were producing in the enlightened West. Possibly the most striking observation **about** the origins of the vampire figure in German poetry is that the German poets seem to have drawn more on Central European than German folklore. The reason for this is that the literary vampire was introduced into eighteenth-century German ballad poetry in response to news about vampire superstition that reached the West as a result of the conflicts between the Habsburg Empire and the Turks over territories in Central Europe during this time.

Background of the German Literary Vampire

During the early eighteenth century, scientists and philosophers in Germany became aware of reports of vampire sightings in Central European countries. These stories reached Western Europe through observations made by Austrian occupying forces who had recently gained control of these territories.

In 1716 the Ottoman Turks declared war on the Habsburgs, having driven the Venetians out of Pelopponesos and the Aegean archipelago and after the Habsburg Emperor Karl VI had formed an alliance with the Venetians. On August 5, 1716 the Habsburgs, under their esteemed commander Prince Eugene of Savoy, defeated the Ottoman army at Petrovaradin (Hungary). After this defeat, Prince Eugene ultimately forced Belgrade to surrender and conquered northern Serbia. Meanwhile another Austrian army took Wallachia. This war against the Ottoman Empire was the last conflict for nearly a century in which the Habsburgs would be victorious. On July 21, 1718 at Pozarevac (Passarowitz) in Serbia peace was restored among Turkey, Austria and Venice. As a result, the Habsburgs were able to keep their conquests in the Banat, eastern Slovenia, northern Serbia and western Wallachia, and the Turks kept their conquests in Venice and Greece.

Occupying forces from the Austrian armies who remained in these areas observed, reported, and officially recorded the bizarre custom of exhuming bodies to prevent vampiric activity. These reports, which were most often officially recorded by clergy, scientists, and medical doctors from Germany and other western European countries, were published in scientific journals and in pamphlets and ultimately gave rise in Western Europe to debates among philosophers, theologians, poets, and scientists on the existence of vampires.

In 1728, the German theologian and academic Michael Ranft wrote a thorough historical report on vampirism in Europe: "Über das Kauen und Schmatzen der Todten in Gräbern" ("On the Chewing and Smacking by the Dead in their Graves"). In 1734, he published an expanded edition of his treatise. In keeping with the times, Ranft wrote his report in what he called a rationalist manner in contrast to what he referred to as the emotional and enthusiastic styles of his contemporaries. He sought answers to the vampire phenomenon in nature, which was in

compliance with the philosophy and scientific methodology of the Enlightenment. For example, he explains that the assumed lack of decay of corpses attributable to vampires is a result of the condition of certain types of soil and chemical processes in the soil in which the bodies of the alleged vampires had been buried.¹

The reports on vampiric activity recorded by doctors, clergy and other officials were initially submitted to Emperor Karl VI who funded expeditions to document the occurrences. Officers stationed in Serbia repeatedly received commands from the Emperor to investigate reports of vampirism in local villages and dutifully sent back their reports. The sheer quantity of correspondence between the Habsburg court in Vienna and the officers stationed in Belgrade that had vampirism and vampiric activity as its main purpose is itself quite remarkable in light of the simultaneous political and philosophical efforts in enlightened and rational thinking (Schroeder 37-69).

The interest in the Serbian stories of vampirism was not, however, restricted to the court in Vienna. Karl VI's circulation of these reports among the ruling houses of the Empire prompted others to write about this superstition. Responsible for the increasing fascination was a notably comprehensible and well-written report by Commander Johannes Flückinger, an Austrian army surgeon. Flückinger's report is variably entitled "Visum et Repertum" or "Arnold Paole," and focuses on vampirism in a Serbian village during the winter of 1731-1732. This caught the attention of many scientists and scholars in Western Europe, some of whom were commissioned to write their own accounts. Such publications attracted members of the literate middle and upper classes to what is referred to by Paul Barber as "an early media event, in which educated Europeans became aware of practices that were by no means of recent origin, but had simply been provided, for the first time, with effective public-relations representatives" (5). These "public-relations representatives", of whom Karl VI was a leading force, effectively transformed the curious vampire superstition of Central Europe into a phenomenon that captivated the Enlightenment intelligentsia in the West.

Among the Western European scholars who contributed to the debate were the French cleric and theologian Dom Augustin Calmet, the French philosopher and writer Voltaire, and the German theologian Christian Friedrich Demelius. Calmet's best known work was his "Dissertations on those persons who return to earth bodily, the excommunicated, the oupires or vampires, vroucolacas, etc." (1751).² Calmet wavered between acceptance of some of the reports and skepticism, the former leading to a satirical attack on him by French philosopher Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764). Voltaire introduces the vampire as a metaphor for the predatory nature of businessmen, and, interestingly, stock market traders in Paris and London specifically who, according to his application of the term, suck the blood from the common people but who are certainly not dead. He also names the clergy, specifically monks, as the true vampires who sustain themselves at the cost of kings and the commoners (see Sturm and Völker, 484, 488). Demelius wrote an essay in 1732 entitled "Philosophischer Versuch, ob nicht die merckwürdige Begebenheit derer Blutsauger in Niederungarn, anno 1732 geschehen, aus denen principiis naturae erleutert wurden" ("A philosophical attempt to determine whether or not the strange occurrence of vampires in Lower Hungary in the year 1732 occurred, from which natural

¹ Ranft's hypotheses have since been recognized and confirmed by forensic science (see, for example, Sturm and Völker 519-520, Bunson 219).

² The English translation has recently been reissued as *Treatise on Vampires & Revenants: The Phantom World* (Westcliff-on-Sea: Desert Island Books, 1993).

principles were explained”). Even the Royal Prussian Society of the Sciences compiled a report on vampirism based on observations made by medical doctors who traveled to Central Europe for this purpose.

Calmet in particular raised the possibility of rational explanations for some of the vampire phenomena. For example, he alludes to the problem of premature burial, which brought about many new burial practices, such as wakes, that are still common practice today.³ Such premature burials occurred frequently enough that people made provisions in their wills that the interment of their bodies be delayed, sometimes as long as three days (Ariès 508).⁴ Calmet also speculates that the typical screams and groans emitted by suspected vampires who were exhumed and subsequently staked occurred because they had been prematurely buried.

In 1740, the eldest daughter of Karl VI, Maria Theresa, became the only woman ever to occupy the Habsburg throne. By the time she took the throne, enlightenment ideas had begun to permeate the empire, reaching Vienna from Germany and Italy. Toward the end of the eighteenth century Vienna had become a center of enlightenment thought in its own right, spreading the spirit of enlightenment thinking throughout the empire and into the Habsburgs’ acquired lands in the Balkans.

By the time Maria Theresa became Empress, the persecution of witches in Western Europe had begun to decline, but was still widespread in Hungary and Poland. Already in 1682 Louis XIV had issued a royal decree, bringing an end to the legal persecution of witches in France, and in 1728 the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I followed suit. Maria Theresa, however, did so as a result of stories of vampirism in these areas that reached her court, rather than the resurgence of witch-hunting in Hungary. For example, after she had heard about the exhumation of a young woman’s body in the village of Hermersdorf, near the Silesian-Moravian border in 1755 and the subsequent disposal of the body as a vampire, Maria Theresa sent two of her court doctors to the village to investigate. After reading the report on this incident, she consulted with her primary court doctor, Gerard van Swieten, who advised her to ban this superstitious practice by legislative means. In March 1755 she issued a legal decree, effectively forbidding the practice of these and other superstitions, such as magic and the persecution of witches. In January 1756, she demanded that all the documentation on current witchcraft trials be submitted to her legal experts before the local courts could hand down any sentences. Most of the death sentences were overturned by Maria Theresa’s legal experts, who used modern scientific and legal arguments to attack the accusations made in the local courts.

Karl VI’s fascination with stories of vampirism from his Balkan lands, together with his daughter’s subsequent efforts to ban practices associated with this superstition and the persecution of witches in Hungary, resulted in a general association of Hungary by Western Europeans with the vampire and other supernatural creatures, such as werewolves (Klaniczay179). Although vampire beliefs in Central Europe were essentially Greek and Slavic in origin, the most popular stories and reports circulating throughout Europe in the early to mid

³ Other rites that developed out of a fear of premature burial include the *conclamatio* (thrice repeated loud call of the allegedly deceased’s name), the practice of adorning the body of the deceased, the practice of exposing the deceased’s face, and the practice of waiting several days before burial or cremation (Ariès 506). Toward the end of the eighteenth century certain rooms were developed in which to deposit the allegedly deceased (*lieux de dépôt*) and the first funeral homes were actually called *vitae dubiae azilia*, or “asylums of questionable life.”

⁴ The oldest such will that Ariès was able to find dates back to 1662. He quotes from several of these wills through the late eighteenth century (508-509). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, stories of premature burials had become less frequent and doctors had begun increasingly to refute the possibility of any gray area between life and death.

eighteenth century placed the vampire in Hungary and neighboring countries. This connection becomes particularly apparent in the image of the vampire in the German ballads that introduced this monster into literature. The literary vampire in the first German ballads from the eighteenth century exhibits distinct characteristics reminiscent of the vampires from the stories and reports collected by Karl VI, rather than Germany's own *Nachzehrer*,⁵ a revenant associated mostly with northern German folklore and superstition that really only chewed on itself, its shroud and neighboring corpses, as its name implies, but has never been known to harm others.

Ossenfelder's poem

In 1748 Christlob Mylius, the editor of the popular scientific journal *Der Naturforscher* (*The Natural Scientist*) commissioned a poet to write a poem with a vampire theme for an issue of his journal, to reflect the theme of an article being published concerning the vampire reports. This poet was Heinrich August Ossenfelder (1725-1801), Mylius' close friend. Ossenfelder, recognized as the first German poet to have published a poem about a vampire, went well beyond his mandate with his effort, unambiguously entitled "Der Vampir."

Aside from negative reviews by Erich Schmidt in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (*The General German Biography*) (vol. 24, 1887), and by Stefan Hock in *Die Vampyrsgen und ihre Verwertung in der deutschen Literatur* (*The Legends of Vampires and their Exploitation in German Literature*) (1900), Ossenfelder has received little critical attention. Yet the poem is important for several reasons. To begin with, Ossenfelder is not only the first German poet known to have written a poem with a vampire theme; he is generally recognized as the first poet to introduce the vampire into creative literature (see Bunson 193, Melton 470, Sturm and Völker 14, Summers 273-274).⁶ More significantly, his poem establishes a direct link to northeastern Hungary as a source for the German literary vampire. In addition, it addresses the eighteenth century struggle to come to terms with superstition in an Age of Enlightenment by presenting the vampire as a metaphor for the threat that superstition posed to people and their religious faith. By presenting this theme in an anacreontic poem,⁷ the poet links the threat to Christianity to seduction, using the vampire figure as aggressive seducer.

The Vampire⁸

My dear young maiden believeth
Unbending, fast and firm
In all the furnished teachings
Of her ever-pious mother;
As people along the Tisza

⁵ *Nachzehrer*: from the German *nach* (after) and *zehren* (to feed on). For details, see Bächthold-Stäubli 6:812 and Barber 95.

⁶ Though Bunson and Melton are not always reliable, this information on Ossenfelder's poem has been corroborated by numerous sources, such as Sturm and Völker and Summers.

⁷ Anacreontic poetry was written in the style of the Greek lyric poet Anacreon who died in 478 BC. The tone of this style of poetry is very life-affirming and festive. Typical themes include wine, friendship, and sexual love.

⁸ This translation is from Melton 470. I have, however, made changes to reflect more accurately the text of the original.

Believe staunchly and heyduck-like
 In vampires that bring death.
 Just wait now, dear Christiane,
 You do not wish to love me;
 On you I take revenge.
 And in Tockay today
 Will drink you into a vampire.
 And when softly you are sleeping
 From your rosy cheeks
 Will I the color suck.
 Then will you be startled
 When I kiss you thus
 And as a vampire kiss:
 When you then start to tremble
 And weakly, like one dying,
 Sink down into my arms
 Then to you I pose my question,
 Are not my teachings better
 Than those of your good mother?

The poem is narrated by a male vampire. First (lines 1-7) he expresses his frustration that his “dear young maiden” stubbornly believes in the Christian teachings of her devoutly religious mother, just as the people along the river Tisza believe in vampires. The Tisza is the longest river in Hungary, which flows approximately 600 km south from northeastern Hungary, near the border to the Slovak Republic and Ukraine, to join the Danube in Serbia and Montenegro. Later in the poem the vampire pinpoints his precise geographic location as Tockay.⁹ Tockay is the German name for a town situated along the western bank of the river Tisza in northeastern Hungary. This is important because it associates the first known literary vampire with an area of Central Europe where the stories of vampirism collected for the Habsburg Emperor Karl VI originated. In fact, Flückinger’s report (“Visum et Repertum”) was a response to investigations of vampirism in Serbia, specifically east of the “Tisa” (Serbian spelling for Tisza). Ossenfelder may also have had in mind that his readers, familiar with the tales and with Flückinger, would immediately make the connection.

Another point of note here is the vampire’s use of the term *heyduck-like* (*heyduckisch* in German) as a point of comparison for the maiden’s stubborn adherence to her mother’s moral principles.¹⁰ The vampire equates her strict old-fashioned beliefs, preached by Christianity, with

⁹ Tokaj is the correct spelling for this town in German and Hungarian. Though the word “Tockayer” is the correct term for the wine of the region, it is also likely from the context that the poet intended to refer to the town when he wrote “And *in* Tockay today / Will drink you into a vampire” (“Ich will dich *in* Tockayer / Zu einem Vampir trinken”) (my emphasis). It is very likely that Ossenfelder either confused the name of the town with the name of the popular wine or that he intentionally used the name of the wine to refer to the town, because the wine from this region was popular in Germany and wine is also a common element of anacreontic poetry (“Tokaj” and Tokajer”; interview with Frank Baron, Professor of German at the University of Kansas and a native Hungarian).

¹⁰ Specifically, he says: “As people along the Tisza / Believe staunchly and *heyduck-like* / In vampires that bring death.” (“Als Völker an der Theyse / An tödtliche Vampire / *Heyduckisch* feste glauben) (my emphasis). Adelung defines “Heyduck” as follows: “The Heyduck [...], a Hungarian word, which actually signifies a lightly armed foot soldier. In Germany this name is used for a servant in the traditional dress of the Hungarian heyduck, whose most

the superstition of vampires. Christianity to him is just another superstitious belief, and his tone implies that her faith angers him. This reaction to her faith brings to the forefront the superstition-religion dialectic that prevailed during the Enlightenment. The vampire phenomenon in Central Europe was investigated by Western scientists who were able to apply theories about decomposition and the determination of death. Hence, the investigation was a scientific phenomenon, debated in universities and published in scientific journals. Ossenfelter's poem, then, thematizes the divide between religion and science that grew out of this struggle against superstition. One might say that the vampire in Ossenfelter's poem represents *scientific* superstition while the young woman, his intended victim, represents *religious* superstition.

Furthermore, during the Enlightenment the German bourgeoisie made great strides in the development of its self-assurance as a social class and its related efforts to define itself in comparison to the aristocracy. It tended to use moral standards as its criteria, contrasting with the perceived moral decay of the aristocracy. For example, the bourgeoisie put a strong emphasis on cultivating certain values that had the purpose of defining it as a group: morality, virtue, and dignity in all things. In the German literature of this period, aristocratic corruption of bourgeois innocence is a particularly common theme. Ossenfelter's poem reflects this bourgeois fight against the corruption of morality, though it is not clear that the vampire figure is necessarily a member of the aristocracy. However, the fact that the intended lover in this poem appears as a vampire signifies that he will cause death and destruction. The fact that he promises to seduce the young woman indicates that he will at the very least destroy her virtue, bringing about the death of a part of her identity that is defining and crucial. This is especially evident when one considers that she is identified in this poem only by her religious faith.

The poem is addressed directly to the young woman whose name is Christiane¹¹, very likely derived from the Latin *christianae*, which means "of a Christian" and from *christianitas*, the Latin word for Christianity. In fact, the young woman is the daughter of a very devout Christian mother, hence she is literally "of a Christian." The vampire's use of the German diminutive form of her name, Christianchen, is the reader's first clue that he has an emotional connection to her. It is likely that he is (or was) a suitor whose love for her was not reciprocated because of her strong religious faith. This becomes particularly apparent in the next several lines when he expresses his plan to take her by force if she will not reciprocate his affections (8-12). For the remainder of the poem he explains to her how she will feel when he has completed his seduction of her. The images of seduction that Ossenfelter uses imply rape, since she is unwilling to consent. Her trembling and sinking into his arms like a dead person implies that he expects that he will in fact bring her to orgasm. After he explains what he will do to her sexually, he asks if his teachings are better than her mother's.

Her mother's teachings are those of Christianity. But what are his teachings? On the one hand, as a vampire from northeastern Hungary, he embodies the superstitions told by the people in the area of northern Hungary near the town of Tokay, with which he is apparently very familiar. In his embodiment of the superstitions of Central Europe, the vampire figure in this poem becomes a representative of Central European superstition in general, which is in turn

refined duty consists of accompanying his master's carriage or sedan-chair" (my translation). Ossenfelter's use of the word *heyduckisch* (heyduck-like) in this poem, then, has a dual purpose. It draws the connection between Germany and Hungary and associates superstition with the lower classes.

¹¹ This name, Christiane, is the feminine equivalent of the masculine name Christian in German. Melton's translation erroneously uses the word 'Christian.' I have substituted it with Christiane to avoid confusion.

associated with an area of the world considered backward and even dangerous to Western Europeans at the time. As a vampire, he is necessarily destructive and associated with death. The vampire aggressor in this poem represents the hostile threat posed by superstition in the struggle between what was believed to be the superstitious beliefs of the people in Hungary and Christianity. Superstition is a male aggressor, namely a vampire, the monstrous Other associated with Central Europe, who has the malicious intent to destroy or corrupt his victim, Christianity, through seduction and by draining its life-force, represented by blood. The added element provided by the anacreontic context of this poem functions specifically to juxtapose the strict moral values of society, represented by the religious values of the mother and the daughter with the possibility of a destructively hedonistic lifestyle, represented by the vampire figure's planned seduction.

As the male vampire indicates, there will be no effective resistance from his victim when he attacks, though this should not be understood as consent on her part. Holding true to his guise as a vampire from Central European folklore, he plans to attack while his victim sleeps. His teachings are that superstition poses the greatest threat to Christianity when Christianity "sleeps" or is not conscious of any threats. Hence, superstition is able to seduce and corrupt Christians if they are not aware of the threat or if they are complacent. In the image of the vampire from Hungary, superstition takes on a destructive quality that threatens the morals of the enlightened Western European from the outside. The threat is made by a figure that is foreign to the enlightened West, but was brought to the West by cultural interaction between Western Europe and Central Europe. The message expressed in this poem is intended for the enlightened reader and warns against the danger posed by superstition, which is associated with a culturally backward Central Europe, and which has the power to destroy if its power is underestimated or if it goes unheeded.

In his poem, Ossenfelder is indebted to elements from the vampire reports discussed earlier: the attack by a male vampire while the victim sleeps and the use of a certain geographic location. But he adds innovations of his own, traits that would help define the literary vampire of the future: the use of the vampire's perspective; the fact that the vampire's victim will become a vampire; an erotic element in the encounter between the vampire and his victim; the role of Christianity as an institution as the vampire's enemy. Irony in this poem is evident in the appearance of a vampire figure in an anacreontic poem. Considering the life-affirming themes that prevail in this genre of poetry, such as wine, love, and merriment, the vampire seems out of place (Best 119). Ossenfelder's poem does not quite meet the carefree and positive mood that is common in anacreontic poetry. In fact, the only anacreontic elements are eroticism and the passing reference to wine with the word "Tockay." Through his use of the vampire as the seducer in this poem, Ossenfelder adds a sinister quality to the otherwise cheerful hedonistic atmosphere that is typical of this style of poetry. In so doing, he introduces the image of the vampire as a figure who is simultaneously erotic and dangerous; he is the seducer unto a hedonistic lifestyle - an image that would prevail into present times.

The literary vampire originated from the vampire of superstition and folklore encountered by officials, clergy, and scientists during their observations in Hungary and Serbia. This link is especially evident in the history of the publication of the first known German vampire poem by Ossenfelder. For that reason, this short poem holds an exceptionally important place in the history of vampire literature.

Der Vampir

Mein liebes Mägdchen glaubet
Beständig steif und feste,
An die gegebenen Lehren
Der immer frommen Mutter;
Als Völker an der Theyse
An tödtliche Vampire
Heyduckisch feste glauben.
Nun warte nur Christianchen,
Du willst mich gar nicht lieben;
Ich will mich an dir rächen,
Und heute in Tockayer
Zu einem Vampir trinken.
Und wenn du sanfte schlummerst,
Von deinen schönen Wangen
Den frischen Purpur saugen.
Alsdenn wirst du erschrecken,
Wenn ich dich werde küssen
Und als ein Vampir küssen:
Wann du dann recht erzitterst
Und matt in meine Arme,
Gleich einer Todten sinkest
Alsdenn will ich dich fragen,
Sind meine Lehren besser,
Als deiner guten Mutter?

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